

Re-orientation of the city plan: Strategic planning and design competition in China

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Abstract

Rather than being abandoned along with the demise of the centrally planned economy, city planning as a profession is flourishing in China. New hybrid plans such as strategic development plans (concept plans) have been invented, and the planning procedure has become more flexible. Design competition and planning consultancy are widespread. This paper examines the development of new strategic development plans and design competition. It is argued that city planning has been re-orientated from a technical rationale, i.e. allocating state development projects to the city, to the imperative derived from market-oriented development, i.e. consolidating competitiveness during inter-city competition. The contradiction between market and planning is that while the status of city planning has been raised and its approach is becoming more strategic, the actual functionality of city planning has become more instrumental.

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1. Introduction

Transition towards a more market-oriented economy in China has reduced the role of the socialist state in direct resource allocation. After more than two decades of economic reform, many directives of the centrally planned economy have been abandoned and replaced by the market. However, city planning has survived market-oriented reform and become the ‘phoenix rising from the ashes’. Since the late 1990s strategic development plans, planning consultation and design competition have proliferated. Indeed, as suggested by a senior planning official in the Ministry of Construction (Zhou, 2002a), city planning in China is now entering the so-called ‘third spring’.¹ With increasing demand for city planning, urban planning and design academies and institutes are overwhelmed by the

task of making plans. This phenomenon cannot be simply attributed to greater pragmatism advocated under economic reform and fast-growing economies.

This paper attempts to examine the recent proliferation of plan-making activities so as to see how city planning has undergone re-orientation. The research is based on extensive interviews with local planning officials and material collected in fieldwork in major Chinese cities. In the second section, the relationship between planning and the market is reviewed with reference to the experience of advanced market economies. In the third section, economic reform and the changing planning system are discussed to provide an overall picture of the re-orientation of the city plan. In the fourth section, the making of the two strategic development plans of Guangzhou and Nanjing is examined. In the fifth section, changing planning practice regarding planning consultation and design competition is discussed. Finally, in conclusion, an assessment is offered regarding the extent to which city planning has now become a more plural, global, and strategic process. While the features identified here are not necessarily applicable to all Chinese cities, especially those in the inner and

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¹ The ‘first spring’ occurred in 1950s, when large-scale economic construction raised the status of city planning. The ‘second spring’ was in 1978 when city planning was restored after having been abandoned in the Cultural Revolution.

central regions, the general trend of re-orientation of the city plan is apparent.

2. Planning and market: re-orientation of the city plan

In order to understand why the introduction of the market has not reduced but rather enhanced the need for planning, it is useful to examine the relationship between planning and the market. The change in city planning in the advanced market economies in the West, especially in the context of recent political economic trend towards neo-liberalism, can be used as a reference point. Planning in the market economies has been justified under the name of eliminating negative externality, and hence the ‘police right’, which is the right of the state to safeguard individuals from being unduly harmed, is the minimum form of planning intervention (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002). Under the welfare state regime, planning has been granted a further role of social redistribution. However, in an economy that is based on private property rights, planning is more passive than in its socialist counterparts. In general, the rationale for planning in market economies is to eliminate or constrain negative externalities. Moreover, its role is limited because the constitution restricts governmental action in relation to land-use regulation, especially in the USA, while the UK system has seen more so-called ‘material considerations’, which are the physical impacts of the plan on its environ, to judge a planning application based on their situation on the ground and thus has greater administrative discretion (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 1997).

The practices of planning before the neo-liberal turn therefore should be viewed as one component in a wider regulatory framework, or the Keynesian welfare state. For example, the role of urban planning in North America was ‘to mediate ongoing territorial politics, mainly ... by providing professional interpretation of relevant territorial realities’ (Roweis, 1983, p. 159). In the UK, planning is a profession that is attached to a particular tier of local government (hence some functions disappeared when the tier was abolished). The reduction of certain government organizations will thus reduce the scope of planning.

While planning systems vary across different political economic settings, the basic tension between planning and the market is witnessed in all planning regimes (Healey, 1992; Newman and Thornley, 1997; Thomas, 1998). For advanced capitalist societies, this tension has become intensified in the post-Fordist transition and led to the re-organization of planning (Dear, 1989; Healey, 1992). There is today ‘a greater appreciation of the need to take account of market trends (even if they have to be subject to public control or influence). There is also a greater willingness on the part of both the public and the private sectors to pool their efforts and resources: the word ‘partnership’ is an important addition to the planning lexicon’ (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002, p. 3). Yiftachel and Alexander (1995) summarize five major changes in recent years: a shift from man-

agerialism to entrepreneurialism, a retreat from managerialism to ‘passive instrumentalism’, further fragmentation of the planning process, a focus on localities, and a continuing gap between aspiration and implementation.

The reduction of planning functionality has been witnessed in various advanced market economies such as the UK, USA and Australia in different historical periods. For example, city planning came under severe attack in the Thatcher era because planning was regarded as a bureaucratic constraint on economic growth (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 1997; Allmendinger, 2003). Indeed, in some respects, planning has become more passive (Rydin, 1998); despite the rhetoric of the entrepreneurial city, the local government in fact ‘played a very subsidiary part and controlled few meaningful resources to allow it to exercise power’ (p. 189). In New Zealand, planning risks being confined to mediating environmental relations and thus becomes instrumental pragmatism (McDermott, 1998). In the USA, the contemporary restructuring of capital has made the practice of modernist planning more precarious (Beauregard, 1991).

In short, seen from a political economic perspective, the role of state intervention granted under the Keynesian welfare state has been rolled back (Tickell and Peck, 2003). At the stage of deregulation, the reduction of planning functionality is an inevitable outcome. However, the experience of planning changes in the UK as well as in other advanced market economies suggests that with increasing inter-city competition, the request for planning intervention becomes more intensive. Together with the political economic change of the capitalist state towards the stage of ‘rolling-out neoliberalism’ (Tickell and Peck, 2003), planning has been partially reformulated under the request for ‘planning for the competitive city’ (Kipfer and Keil, 2002). As a consequence, city planning has begun to pay more attention to enhancing structural competitiveness through strategically making the built environment productive and attracting consumption capital through image repackaging.

Seen from the perspective of changing urban governance (Harvey, 1989; Fainstein, 1994; Jessop, 1998), the shift from comprehensive rational planning under Fordism to a more entrepreneurial planning model since the 1980s is more understandable. The UK planning experience is an interesting example that suggests a dynamic relationship between neo-liberal rhetoric and the reality of fierce economic competition across local, national and global scales. Market orientation reduced planning intervention in some aspects but enhanced functionality in selective aspects such as concern over environmental sustainability and urban amenities. Under the notion of the entrepreneurial city and city competitiveness, market orientation does not necessarily eliminate planning – instead, planning is re-oriented in its content and style to better suit the new requirement for economic promotion and city marketing.

In summary, the experience of Western market economies does not suggest that a more market-oriented economy and neo-liberal governance reduces the requirement

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